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ABSTRACT

School-Based Management/Shared Decision Making is a city-wide program supported by New York City Schools in collaboration with Bank Street College, based on the belief that students, parents, school staff, and communities have unique needs, and that these needs can best be addressed by these persons. Participating schools formed teams of administrators, teachers, other staff, parents, and, in some cases, students, to be decision-making bodies or teams in their schools. A research team was formed to capture the complexity of the venture in 13 schools. This document describes the operation of the decision-making teams and their dynamics and provides recommendations to enhance the process. Problems of drawing all decision-making team members into equal partnership in school-based management are documented, noting the tendency for principals and union representatives to fall back on their traditional authorities. Parents also faced problems working with school staff, particularly from school personnel who are unwilling to allow parents to have a say in curriculum development and areas of student learning. A major recommendation is that all decision-making team members should have access to information necessary for full participation. Another is that each decision-making team should include an appropriately trained and neutral evaluator to facilitate development and functioning. (SLD)

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SCHOOL-BASED MANAGEMENT/SHARED DECISION-MAKING: A STUDY OF SCHOOL REFORM IN NEW YORK CITY

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Atlanta, April 1993

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INTRODUCTION

In September 1990, the New York City Public Schools Chancellor created the Professional Development Center (PDC) in collaboration with Bank Street College. A major part of its work was to support School-Based Management/Shared Decision-Making, a city-wide program based on the belief that students, parents, school staffs and communities have unique needs, and that these needs can best be identified and addressed by them. Participating schools were required to form teams comprising administrators, teachers, other staff, parents and, in some high schools, students. These teams were to be the decision-making bodies in their schools.

The PDC established a research team to document its work with thirteen SBM/SDM schools in order to capture the complexity of this new venture. This report by the team focuses on the first year of the PDC's work. It is based on in-depth research interviews with PDC administrators and the facilitators assigned to the teams, on responses to written questionnaires administered to the latter at the end of the year, on (anonymous) needs assessment questionnaire responses of the various constituents on the teams and in the wider school community, on research observations at PDC meetings and retreat, and on workshops for the SBM/SDM network citywide.

The report describes, first, how the SBM/SDM teams worked, examining areas in their development--their representation, issues of communication with the school at large, writing their mission statements, and responsibility for decisions. Second, it discusses team dynamics, giving particular attention to key players and sources of conflict. The report concludes with recommendations designed to overcome some of the major obstacles confronting SBM/SDM teams in the early stages of their development and to facilitate their successful implementation over time.

THE SBM/SDM TEAMS AT WORK

Representation

PDC facilitators worked with Elementary Schools (including K and pre-K), Middle Schools and High Schools in most of the Manhattan Schools Districts. The schools ranged in size, with 200-1200 students, and 12-60 staff, and included students from most if not all ethnic groups.

The average size of the school teams was 12. In one small school 90% of the staff was either on the team or a member of a sub-committee of the team. The typical team consisted of 5 teachers, 2 other staff, 1 or 2 administrators, 3 parents and, in few instances, a student or two. All teams, were required to include the school United Federation of Teachers (UFT) representative, and most included the principal. Most teams were elected by their major constituent groups, but some, usually in smaller schools, selected themselves--those who were interested showed up.

There was no consistency in the ways in which people became chairpersons, nor from which constituency they were drawn. (In one school the elected chairperson was a paraprofessional.) Some teams elected one person for the year; others had two people sharing the role or alternating as chairpersons; at least one team rotated the position among its members at each meeting.

The New York City Board of Education arranged for each team to have a specially trained facilitator, some of whom were provided by the PDC. The major functions of the facilitators were keeping the teams "on track", helping them to develop needed knowledge and effective procedures, team building, goal setting, and role negotiation.

Communication

A critical element in SBM/SDM is good communication between the team and the remainder of the school community. Reporting mechanisms from the team to the

school at large ranged from none at all to elaborate formalized methods of communication. Some teams simply did not deal with issues of how to make team decisions available to the constituencies. At the other end of the scale, teams produced minutes, met with their constituencies, and provided channels for non-team members to respond to communications and to present topics for the agenda. All teams developed agendas for their meetings. In some cases input was actively sought from all staff and parents, while in other cases agenda-building was solely a team activity.

Mission

A major focus during the first year of most of the teams' operations was the striving for common goals, defined, generally, in a "mission statement". Teams used a variety of approaches to preparing their mission statements, and some took most of the year to do so. In one instance, a facilitator joined a team in January and found that it, to that point, had been unable to define any aims or objectives. It took that team two months to do so. In another case, a facilitator noted that none of the team's issues focused on students' learning. Some of the mission statements embraced the broad concepts of where the team felt the school should go; others dealt with more specific issues, such as curriculum revision. One school determined that it would spend its time shaping the next year's schedule.

There were, of course, cases where the teams' attention was focused directly on issues other than those defined in their mission statements. One school reshaped its curriculum in order to remove constraints on scheduling. Others wrestled with decisions about whom to "excess" in the face of a current budget crunch, or the adoption of a new reading program, or the appointment of a new principal.

Whatever the decisions and outcomes of team meetings, the mission statements gave the team a framework within which to assume their new responsibilities, that is, a sense of the goals to be achieved, and ways to achieve them. This is important for

groups of people with little or no experience in running a school. It is also important in focusing the attention of all team members on agreed upon goals and thereby negating individual agendas. Once a mission statement has been formulated and agreed upon, such potentially forceful roles as principal or a strong UFT chair are channeled with the rest of the team toward goals which, by the consensual nature of their selection, belong to all team members.

Decision Making

In the early stages of the program it was clearly difficult for teams to fully accept their new responsibilities for making decisions and carrying them out. In one school, where the principal did not regularly attend meetings, the team decided to "let the principal do as she always did"--make all of the usual administrative decisions--while the team considered broad curriculum changes. There was seemingly little consideration given by the team to the idea that it was "reneging" on its mandate, that leaving major decisions to the principal was not consistent with "shared decision-making". In a second school the principal was placed in the position of executing decisions made by the team, being left with all the "nitty gritty" work. Here again, the team was clearly failing to assume its responsibilities under school-based management/shared decision-making in leaving the practicalities to the principal (whose job that had always been.) In a third school, following a rift in the team, the principal invoked the authority of the principal's role to direct the team's work for the rest of the year. In this school, therefore, it was the principal, who by disregard of team processes, reversed the progress which previously the team (including the principal) had made.

Although these are specific instances in particular schools, they illustrate important issues that may emerge in a school's move toward school-based management/shared decision-making. It is in the context of such challenges that the

role of facilitator (described below) is of crucial importance both in maintaining the team's focus on its decision-making processes and in helping the team understand the full scope of its responsibilities.

TEAM DYNAMICS

Key Players

It is inherent in the concept of SBM teams that ideally all members should be equal, and that, therefore, status, whether in the school or outside it, should not be a determinant of power on the team. But, not surprisingly, this egalitarian concept was often difficult to realize.

The principal. As might be expected, teams generally viewed the principal as their major source of information and guidance, giving him or her a natural preeminence. By the nature of their day-to-day work, principals have access to a wide base of information, much experience in the constraints and confusions of running a school, and unquestioned responsibility and accountability for decisions made within, for, and about the school. In one school, it was noted, a chairperson was especially deferential to the principal; in another, the principal preempted the chair in choosing to close discussion of an issue which the principal did not support. In a third school, an underlying power struggle was particularly noted when, on the failure of the team to make headway on an important issue, the principal asserted and thereafter maintained authority.

The UFT chair. But the principal was not the only key player found on the teams. Indeed, it was frequently the UFT chair who was also cited as having major influence. In one school, for example, the UFT member reportedly raised the contentious issues on the team; in another, it was the UFT member who kept the team

on track. In the case of a third team, the union representative took an active lead in inducting a somewhat resistant new principal into the shared decision-making process.

It is thus noteworthy that, at least in the early stage of SBM/SDM, two key players on the teams--the principal and the UFT chair--were found to be those who traditionally hold powerful roles in the schools at large.

The facilitator. Finally, the facilitator--an outsider to the school--turned out to be a third key player, a participant who was almost universally perceived by teams as central to all their efforts.

Indeed, facilitators took on a wide range of functions. They were seen as a resource, as a conduit to the range of activities and expertise that they themselves or the PDC could offer. Some facilitated workshops, some brought in visiting speakers, some introduced team building exercises to help teams work together, some led staff development sessions in curriculum. Overall, they kept the teams "on track", helped them to develop effective procedures, to set goals, to negotiate roles, and to build a team that could make collaborative decisions.

Most facilitators were welcomed by, and worked very closely with, the teams. As well-trained, objective" outsiders", they brought a perspective which was not blinkered by the rivalries which naturally exist in any organization; they were able, as one facilitator put it "to go home at night and not return in the morning to face an angry senior staff member." Several commented that they felt their presence in meetings cushioned the negative impact of the more assertive team members. They were clearly perceived by a number of teams as mediators, as negotiators, and were thereby placed, sometimes, in very difficult roles.

There is little question that the facilitator was usually critical to successful team functioning. Indeed, it is a highly complex role which ideally demands a solid understanding of group dynamics and team-building, and, sometimes, consummate

skills in mediation, complemented by knowledge of teaching and learning, of how schools work--and how they might work better.

Sources of Conflict

Matters of conflict frequently lay beneath the surface. Various constituencies were found to have differing needs as well as differing perceptions of the needs (and demands) of others. These differences often went unrecognized, producing marked tensions among team members. The needs assessment questionnaire was particularly instrumental in revealing the sources of such tensions.

Within staff conflicts. In many cases, sharp differences were found between teachers and administrators, often around the teachers' new role as decision-makers in the school. Even among administrators, there emerged strong differences around, for example, issues of children's learning. The needs assessment helped clarify these differences and enabled the teams to begin grappling with them.

A more widely encountered source of tension was identified in the clearly partisan position taken by teachers and administrators, on the one hand, and parents, on the other. In fact, it is in this arena of professional versus lay that the egalitarian principle underlying SBM/SDM was most seriously threatened. There was on the part of parents a natural tendency to defer to school people; there was also the implicit assumption on the part of many school staff that parents have little to offer regarding the education of their children. Thus consistently across the teams, school staffs revealed on the needs assessment questionnaires that while they wanted parents on the teams, they did not support the concept of parents contributing to curriculum ideas for their children. Parents, however, expressed the wish for full participation, including a role in curricular decisions.

Yet parents were by no means unrealistic about their ability to be effective team members without acquiring a great deal of information. Indeed, the needs assessments

revealed that even those parents who reported a high degree of involvement in school activities recognized almost universally that they needed to know more about a wide range of areas, from budgets to how decisions are made in the school to issues involving curriculum, in order to participate more fully in decisions about the school.

By the same token, the needs assessments showed that teachers and administrators themselves were by no means satisfied with their own knowledge and competencies to carry out their roles, and these constituencies expressed the need for new instructional strategies, for organizational and managerial skills, and for improved techniques to foster good community relations. They also recognized the need for their teams to work together: they requested training in working in groups, in conflict resolution, and in decision-making--all germane to the difficult new tasks that confronted them at this time.

It is clear that as teams are enabled to see and to better understand how the differing needs of their constituent groups lead to conflict and tension among their members, and as they are given access to relevant information and training, their movement toward full realization of the goals of SBM/SDM will be greatly facilitated.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SBM/SDM is a challenging initiative, bringing together groups of people with little or no experience in decision-making, and setting them two major tasks--to run a school and, as school teams, to collaborate in doing so. Few members of these constituent groups had previously any say about how their schools operated, and, likewise, few of them had worked with any of the others to solve common problems.

This report has underscored the recurring problem of drawing all team members into equal partnership in school-based management/shared decision-making. In particular it has been noted that, at times, principals and union representatives have

This report has underscored the recurring problem of drawing all team members into equal partnership in school-based management/shared decision-making. In particular it has been noted that, at times, principals and union representatives have asserted the traditional authority of their roles, thereby failing to comply with the underlying ethos of "shared decision-making", and suggesting a lack of understanding on their part of the dynamics which drive these and other teams or committees.

Equally, attention has been paid to the problems facing parents in working with professional school staffs. There is a strong indication by schools staff team members that they consider responsibility for decisions about students' learning to be solely their prerogative. Teachers and administrators indicated both a willingness to have parents on their school teams, and, simultaneously, a strong reluctance for those same parents to have any say in curriculum or other areas of student learning. On no occasion did any school person recommend action which might have reduced that conflict.

Recommendation:

Team members need to become sensitized to any indications that partisan positions might be subtly, but significantly, eroding the "shared decision-making" process.

A closely related issue lies in the area of access to the types of knowledge that are needed by members of a team. Although many parents clearly wanted to become full participants on the teams, even those with much experience in school and community life appeared to have reservations about their qualifications for doing so. Parents have consistently indicated a strong desire/need for information on a wide number of issues around school management.

It should not be assumed, however, that only parents lack information and understanding. Many of the staff members of school teams have had little or no prior

experience in running their schools. They, too, recognized their need for access to information and training that would enable them to fulfil their new roles.

Clearly, if all of the constituents are to be fully active team members they must be able to discuss and determine all issues on an equal basis.

Recommendation:

There is a strong need to ensure that both school and community people who are team members have access to the information necessary to enable them to participate fully in the wide range of decisions which teams are called on to make.

Finally, this report has emphasized the many critical contributions that a facilitator can make to the functioning of a team and its move toward becoming an effective manager and decision-maker.

Recommendation:

Each SBM/SDM team should be provided with an appropriately trained, objective, non-school person to facilitate its optimal development and functioning, especially during the start-up stages. It follows that every possible action should be taken, through selection, training and the provision of appropriate resources, to ensure that facilitators are competent in a broad spectrum of areas related to the diverse needs of schools and their communities, and in the management, decision-making and team-building skills that are required in this complex and demanding role.

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